

Priorities: How To Rank "Pursuing Pleasure" vs. "Avoiding Pain"

Post by "Cassius" of February 5, 2019 at 5:18 PM

Some FB responses:

E:

If I lived as if I would die tomorrow, I would actually do some different things than I would anticipating that I may live another 20-30 years, and the difference is important. I don't want to endure 20 years of diabetes, but if today were my last day I'm sure I would not give any thought to the long term consequences of my food choices. I would likely not do any income producing work at all today if it were my last day-- but that would be a bad idea if I plan to have food and shelter on an ongoing basis for several more years. I would take no concern for protecting myself from a hangover, an STI or bankruptcy if I were dying tomorrow. The hedonic calculus would not be the same.

However, I do remind myself that I only get ONE life, however long it lasts, every day when I wake up, to make sure I remember not to postpone happiness!

N: Is there a difference?

Is it more reasonable to pump your flooded basement by pushing all of the bad water out? Or by pumping all of the good air in? The goal is to get the water out, regardless of whether you focus on replacing the bad water with fresh air, or by having fresh air displace the bad water. Six one, half-dozen the other.

Similarly, if we're trying to -- let's say -- 'get over a cold', then pursuing pleasure might look like 'drinking orange juice', 'soaking in warm water', and 'resting your head'. Avoiding pain might look like 'NOT drinking rotten milk', and 'NOT soaking in cold water', and 'NOT putting more stress on your head'.

Tomato, tomato, right?

Cassius Amicus

I think it helps to look at it this way: Why do you see yourself pursuing music and art, Nate, just because you have free time you want to fill and you're tired of cleaning your fingernails?

No, you pursue art because you LOVE art, and because of the deep emotional feeling that it gives you to pursue it. In general, do you really HATE pain with the same intensity that you love pleasures such as art? Are these things of equal significance in life, especially given the analysis that pain is not to be overly feared because it is short if intense and manageable if long?

From that point of view you are not indifferent to the choice you make. Yes you COULD devote yourself to lining up the tomatoes in your refrigerator in FIFO order, and that would avoid the pain of not being able to find the freshest tomato. But what do you LOVE in life? And what makes life worthwhile?

Isn't it important how someone prioritizes your thought processes? I'm thinking also that reducing priorities to mathematical equivalences isn't a good idea either, since the model (math) isn't the same as the reality (our feelings).

Cassius Amicus Maybe another way of asking the question. Would we really expect the young person who sets out in life thinking "My goal is to avoid pain!" to end up in similar places as the young person who sets the goal "My goal is to pursue pleasure"? It seems to me intuitively correct that they will NOT end up at the same place, but describing why is an interesting exercise. I'd love to see some people comment on this formulation of the question.

E:

I have a friend who rides motorcycles and who likes to say that if people look at potholes, they tend to drive into them. Don't know if original with him. But I agree, in that the way the human mind works, if we concentrate on avoiding something ("don't think of a white bear"), sometimes we wind up with it on our minds more. If we focus on avoiding pain, we will be reminding our brains "pain, pain" in order to stay away from it, and we can actually experience a little bit of pain just from thinking about it. We will be constantly watching for pain to make sure we avoid it, and in doing so, we will probably find more pain than we would have otherwise.

Whereas if we primarily focus on pleasure, even just thinking "pleasure" provides a little taste of what we are aiming at. We will be watching and thinking of what we can do right now and later that will be most pleasurable, so even the looking for what's next is a pleasant process, and we will be more likely to notice pleasurable possibilities if we are watching out for them.

Elli Pensa

Why someone wants to avoid something that is not present ? Because he does not want to enjoy the present ! But does he know that this present becomes quickly the past ? As for the future does not belong totally to us. So life is wasted, and when death comes, he lived a life to avoid not the pain actually, but the pleasures that life has....It is like that one who does not want to fall in love, because he wants to avoid to run some risks of getting to know the other, without leaving himself free to feel the heartbeats of love. That's the whole issue. Usually the stingy persons are acting like this. They do not want to give and to get. They are reluctant to share ANYTHING with another person. So, if their option is to stay alone just to avoid pain, I

would like to tell them : Please do not forget to take your pills of anesthesia. 😊

Bryan

Pain and pleasure are kind of relative to the person's perspective. One person's "pain" is another's pleasure. Take getting drunk as an example. But suppose for a moment that pain and pleasure were always objective things and everyone knew exactly that was painful and pleasurable from birth. Since pain and pleasure fall on a scale of degrees, in order to answer this question we'd have to find a choice between 2 equally evaluated choices.

It's really hard to answer this question without being glib about degrees of pain/pleasure. But if it were up to me I would pursue pleasure as that has an effect on me personally more than pain affects me. Maybe it's really to each his/her own.

Cassius Amicus

"But suppose for a moment that pain and pleasure were always objective things and everyone knew exactly that was painful and pleasurable from birth." With only mild modifications I think this is exactly what Epicurus said. We know pleasure and pain because we FEEL it, and the feeling is what it is. We don't always predict the long-term results of actions very well, and frequently we pick something and get a very different result. But the fact that different people have different feelings in eating a type of food, for example, or that pleasures and pain vary intensity, does not do anything to undermine the basic point that feelings of pain and pleasure are our ultimate faculty of feeling what to pursue and what to avoid.

Bryan

I got yah Cassius. Thanks.

T

I am guessing that you are since pain is mostly unavoidable in life that pleasure would be more of importance to pursue than avoiding pain.

Cassius Amicus

I am not sure that the unavoidability is really the issue as much as the issue is that the shortness of life, plus the pain that all of us experience, means that pleasure is in short supply during the brief duration of our lives, so it makes no sense to do anything other than to pursue net pleasure during the brief time that we have --- from a "Seize the day" type of perspective.

N:

I think that, a lot of times, 'pleasure-pursuit' utilizes 'pain-avoidance' as the most effective mechanism to pursue pleasure. 'Hedonic Calculus' often calls for 'anxiety-reducing mechanisms' as much as it does for 'peak experiences'.

It's like having a migraine, or breaking a bone, or some other injury or abuse. In those circumstances, pursuing your talents and fulfilling your passions isn't nearly as desirable as receiving a morphine IV and taking a long nap.

N:

Needless to say, I see what you guys mean in terms of distinguishing 'pursuing something you want' from 'avoiding something you dislike'.

Cassius Amicus

N, I want to be sure to say that I do agree with you that in those circumstances you are talking about, pain avoidance clearly DOES deserve to be the main focus. There are huge numbers of unfortunate / tragic situations in the world where people are in such pain that getting out of it is totally consuming. I absolutely get that, and do not mean to undercut that perspective.

BUT, and this is a big but, I do think Epicurean philosophy tends toward the more cheerful perspective that for MOST people and MOST of the time, pleasure is achievable, even if we have to lower our expectations to extremely simple living. The pleasure we get from extremely simple living when that is all that is available to us is definitely worth living for.

So that's the foundation of the simple living perspective, but in many cases, MORE is possible than "extremely simple" living, and where more pleasure can be obtained at a cost of pain that we judge to be worthwhile, then by all means we should act to gain that, and not accept simply the minimum available to us.

Cassius Amicus

Remember this from the Jefferson Head and Heart letter, which contains the phrase "the greater part of life is sunshine"

Heart. And what more sublime delight than to mingle tears with one whom the hand of heaven hath smitten! To watch over the bed of sickness, & to beguile its redious & its painful moments! To share our bread with one to whom misfortune has left none! This world abounds indeed with misery: to lighten its burthen we must divide it with one another. But let us now try the virtues of your mathematical balance, & as you have put into one scale the burthen of friendship, let me put its comforts into the other. When languishing then under disease, how grateful is the solace of our friends! How are we penetrated with their assiduities & attentions! How much are we supported by their encouragements & kind offices! When heaven has taken from us some object of our love, how sweet is it to have a bosom whereon to recline our heads, & into which we may pour the torrent of our tears! Grief, with such a comfort, is almost a luxury! In a life where we are perpetually exposed to want & accident, yours is a wonderful proposition, to insulate ourselves, to retire from all aid, & to wrap ourselves in the mantle of self-sufficiency! For assuredly nobody will care for him who care for nobody. But friendship is precious, not only in the shade but in the sunshine of life; & thanks to a benevolent arrangement of things, the

greater part of life is sunshine.

<https://newepicurean.com/the-greater-part-of-life-is.../>

(Note: it appears that "redious" is in the original, not a mistype)